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# **DIVERGING AND CONVERGING: INTEGRATIVE INSIGHTS ON A PARADOX META-PERSPECTIVE**

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## INTRODUCTION

Paradox theory stands at an exciting moment in organization and management theory. Scholars increasingly seek out insights about the nature and management of contradictory demands to explain a wide array of organizational phenomena across multiple levels of analysis. Our two reviews in the 2016 *Academy of Management Annals* attest to this growing breadth and depth, each integrating and expanding related, yet different bodies of research. Schad, Lewis, Raisch, and Smith (2016) emphasize the depth of scholarship by analyzing an increasing number of paradox studies within management science. Putnam, Fairhurst, and Banghart (2016) highlight the breadth of scholarship by comparing paradoxes that emerge from multiple theories and paradigms that embrace an interdisciplinary orientation. By drawing on distinct literatures, these two manuscripts reveal diverse insights and reflections about paradoxical demands in organizations. In this integrative reflection, we juxtapose our two review articles, surface distinct assumptions and emphases, highlight complementarities, and raise questions for future scholarship. In doing so, we hope to fuel insights toward a meta-perspective on paradox.

## ARENAS OF INTEGRATION

*Paradox* has been used broadly to refer to anything inconsistent, or narrowly defined as absurd interrelationship that defy logic. Putnam and colleagues highlight widespread usages associated with paradox and related terms, specifically, dualities, dialectics, contradictions, and tensions. Schad et al. likewise compare nuances of definitions, highlighting the nature of paradox as contradictory, interdependent, and persistent.

Despite definitional variation in some cases, both papers converge on paradox as *the* phenomena for complex times and as persistent contradictory elements locked in relationship to each another and impervious to resolution. Collectively, paradox and related terms move beyond dilemmas, tradeoffs, and conflicts, which can be solved by splitting and choosing. In this integration piece, we thus seek to collectively advance our theorizing of paradox for the study of organizations. Specifically, comparing our two *Annals* chapters surfaces four critical themes that serve as arenas for integration: 1) locus of paradoxical tensions, 2) dynamic relationships, 3) power, and 4) multiplicity. In each of these themes, we compare insights from both of our chapters. We note how they diverge, and use these different emphases to surface complementary insights and to inform future scholarship.

### Locus of Paradoxical Tensions

Scholars offer various understandings of the locus of contradictory, yet interdependent tensions, particularly as they reflect various paradigms and ontological assumptions. Schad and colleagues surface a breadth of ontological assumptions within the management literature. Drawing from historical roots, they point out that philosophers and theologians often depict paradox within the natural order, while psychoanalysts position paradox as emerging in individual emotional and cognitive experiences (for more information, see Capra, 2010; Smith & Berg, 1987). These alternative origins lead to divergent assumptions about paradox as inherently embedded within social systems (Ford & Backoff, 1988) or emerging through individual sensemaking practices. As a result, scholars alternatively emphasize the role of structural elements or agency to surface paradoxical tensions (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). For example,

whereas some scholars depict the tensions between exploring new possibilities and exploiting old certainties as embedded within adaptive systems (e.g., Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; March, 1991), others highlight senior leaders' agency to juxtapose these tensions and invoking their interrelationships (Smith & Tushman, 2005).

Putnam and colleagues do not take the organization as an entity for granted, nor the existence of paradox as a given. Instead, they examine organizations and paradoxes from the bottom-up, focusing on how discourses and language shape the construction of reality. Discourse anchors itself in socio-historical contexts. When organizational actors draw on one or more of these discourses across settings, their practices become patterned and routinized in ways that create systems. Thus, paradoxes emerge through ongoing interactions that constitute systems and the nature of organizing. Their review, though, includes critical studies, which locate tensions in systems. In contrast, scholars who embrace other meta-theoretical traditions believe that once human actors enter the scene, they mediate systems.

Smith and Lewis (2011) offer an integrative perspective that brings together both an inherent and socially constructed ontology. Social construction develops boundaries and delineations in systems, which embed inherent, though often latent paradoxes. These paradoxes become salient through environmental conditions such as plurality, change, and scarcity, or through individual sensemaking and social construction. For example, all systems contain persistent tensions between exploring and exploiting (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008), even though members of an organization may only experience these tensions when pressures for plurality, change, or scarcity create stress in the system, or when leaders actively juxtapose these alternative demands (see Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Together, we encourage scholars to acknowledge their ontological approaches more explicitly and to reveal their assumptions that underlie the locus of paradox. We further urge scholars to explore the interactions from different foci as alternative lenses can surface insights into the greater complexity of paradox.

### **Dynamic Relationships**

Paradox and related phenomena form in and through dynamic actions and interactions. Both papers purport that paradoxical processes are important in understanding how paradox takes shape, sustains itself, and gets managed (or not). Putnam et al. embrace a process orientation by focusing on the "live action" of the present moment and by using a muscular view of language that parses the fine points of tension-based problem setting (e.g., language in this sense includes not just words, but framing and labeling, narrative structure, categories that stretch or break, and discourses that include then exclude) (e.g., Engeström and Sannino, 2011; Ford and Backoff, 1988; Hatch, 1997; Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993; Huxham and Beech, 2003; Palmer and Dunford, 2002).

Schad and colleagues call for more studies to embrace this dynamic interactions. Paradoxes emerge as cyclical relationships. Individual emotional and cognitive responses to paradoxical tensions alternatively fuel vicious or virtuous cycles. Vicious cycles surface as individuals react defensively to contradictory demands, split alternatives and choose between them, such that opposing elements remain locked in detrimental, intractable conflict (Lewis, 2000). In contrast, virtuous cycles emerge as individuals accept and engage in competing demands simultaneously. For example, Sundaramurthy and Lewis (2003) note that practices fuel either detrimental vicious or valuable virtuous cycles in response to paradoxes of corporate governance. Extant papers however primarily shy away from dynamic interactions, focusing instead on naming a paradox,

and assuming its stability and constancy. Schad and colleagues observe that previous scholarship treats paradox either as a noun, an existing state that depicts types of oppositional dualities, or a verb in which alternative poles remain in ongoing relationship with one another. As their analysis suggests, more studies depict paradox as a state, with fewer of them emphasizing the ongoing paradoxical interactions.

The orientations that both chapters present can work hand-in-hand. The constitutive approach of Putnam et al. targets language and process in more direct ways than do many of the studies that Schad et al. review. The widespread use of grounded theory methods in many paradox studies often glosses what language is doing to enact and respond to contradictory demands in ways that constitute vicious/virtuous cycles. In effect, many studies in Schad and colleagues' review treat language as reflecting rather than enacting paradoxes. However, these studies often do a better job of capturing the organizational implications of paradox than do the process-based ones that Putnam and colleagues examined. Indeed, language-oriented studies sometimes find it difficult to "scale up" from the organizing potential of language to "organization" (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). Together, we encourage more research that surfaces and theorizes about paradoxical dynamics; hence, the bottom-up approach of Putnam and colleagues and the more top-down orientation of Schad and colleagues can work in tandem to make this happen.

## **Power**

Power is a key element in the arguments that both articles make about paradox. To wit, power is foundational to the functioning and manifestations of paradoxes in all organizations. Schad and colleagues refer to power as the push-pull in the competition between opposite poles. They find that extant paradox research often overlooks the role of power and thus assumes the equal influence of opposing poles. For example, studies of organizational change emphasize the inertial power that embolden the status quo over change (i.e. Levinthal & March, 1993; March, 1991), yet scholars treat paradoxes as equally informed by forces of exploration and exploitation (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smith, 2014). Schad and colleagues therefore call for more insight about the relative influence of the forces that impinge on opposite poles. Furthermore, they depict power as a force that facilitates emotional reactions in ways that surface individual and organizational defensiveness.

Putnam and colleagues view power as embedded in a struggle for meaning linked to understanding organizational circumstances. Drawing from a bottom-up view, power extends beyond emotion experiences in responding to paradoxes and becomes the way that the dynamics of paradox are lived out through actions and interactions. The emphasis on power in discourse focuses on how actors assign and negotiate meanings. For example, Iedema et al. (2004) examine the contradictions associated with the doctor-as-manager, a role increasingly common in today's health care systems. Such a role requires doctors to rapidly shift identifications back and forth from "colleague," to "manager," to "first among equals," to "medical professional." Each implies a different base for authority and legitimacy; thus in shifting their roles, power effects become apparent in the struggle over meaning and over whose definition of the situation will prevail. Iedema et al. note, however, that such struggles never reach closure; hence, the doctor-manager must carefully, consciously, and continually balance opposing discourses.

Together our views of power complement one another. Specifically, the focus on power dynamics in the forces that shape competition between two opposing poles can be wedded with

studies of power struggles in meaning that both enact and develop paradoxes in organizations. From this foundation, Sheep, Fairhurst, and Khazanchi (in press) argue that actors combine and enmesh tensions in discursive *knots*. In this way, they recognize the forces afoot that amplify or attenuate certain poles as they interweave tensions to tie the knot (e.g., Sheep & Fairhurst, 2015). Together, we believe that paradox insights will be elevated when scholars recognize the multiple approaches by which power informs, and is informed by, paradoxical dynamics.

## **Multiplicity**

To avoid too much complexity, scholars often narrow their foci and study one primary paradox at a particular organizational level. Schad and colleague catalogue research that employs a paradox lens at different levels, including the field (Chung & Beamish, 2010), organization (Raisch & Tushman, forthcoming), senior leadership (Smith, 2014), middle managers (Huy, 2002; Luscher & Lewis, 2008), teams (Gebert, Boerner, & Kearney, 2010), and individuals (Miron-Spektor, Gino, & Argote, 2011). Doing so has surfaced valuable ideas about a broad array of paradoxes, but results in less insights about how paradox functions at multiple levels of analysis and amid other paradoxical tensions. As Putnam and colleagues argue, excluding research on multiple tensions and levels often bypasses the presence of multiple voices. They advocate preserving the interrelationships among multiple tensions by capturing an array of sensemaking accounts from organizational actors. Such a view opens the door to *multi-vocality* since actors often develop competing interpretations of paradoxical situations (e.g., based on their organizational roles, hierarchical positions, socio-economic attributes, etc.). Capturing multiple voices, then, often surfaces multiple tensions in and across organizational levels and in various combinations. Similarly, Schad and colleagues suggest that some studies have begun to unpack how tensions are *nested*, where one level informs and defines other levels (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009), as well as *interwoven* across type, where one type of tension informs others (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008).

Together, our perspectives argue that taking multiplicity of levels, tensions, and voices into account will enhance paradox insight. Clearly actors' and analysts' views of the world should inform one another. Analysts may see things that actors do not. At the same time, though, organizational actors are knowledgeable agents (Garfinkel, 1967) who can account for the contingencies associated with how and why they act from within a set of local conditions marked by multiple tensions, levels, and voices.

## **EXTENDING A PARADOX META-PERSPECTIVE**

Our two reviews of the extant literature collectively challenge the work on organizational paradoxes. In doing so, we facilitate theorizing from within a meta-perspective, one that encourages multiple orientations on paradox to grow and coexist. A meta-perspective draws on divergent paradigms and theories and situates them in dialogue with one another through acknowledging and respecting differences and holding them in tension with one another. Even though our articles diverge in their focus and insights, their integration highlights important commonalities. The four arenas of integration that draw our two chapters together indicate that paradox studies could benefit from greater intricacies. Specifically, we suggest three key areas for moving future research 1) toward complexity, 2) toward process and longitudinal work, and 3) toward emotion and irrationality.



First, our reviews collectively recognize that paradox studies have converged toward greater simplicity, particularly ones in which analysts often isolate one paradoxical tension within a particular point in time. As Benson (1977) suggested in the early work on dialectics, organizations are rife with multiple and interrelated tensions that require studying them *in their totality*. Expanding our insights on paradox therefore calls for more thoughtfulness about the interrelationships between one set of tensions and those around it, whether they are nested or interwoven. Future research can also focus on how sets of tension accentuate and amplify tensions across levels. In their article, Schad and colleagues offer areas for future research that promote a selective increase of complexity in paradox studies. Yet, as they suggest, paradoxically theorizing requires carefully balancing complexity with parsimony. To move away from simplifying paradoxes, Putnam et al. recommend that researchers rely on organizational actors to explain *why* and *how* they act within their interwoven or nested contingencies. Hence, they believe that complexity stems from a deeper foray into actors' local knowledge, routine interactions, and experiences of interwoven and layered tensions.

Second, our integrative insights suggest that paradox researchers need to embrace a process lens by focusing on how tensions emerge, change, and reproduce over time. The studies that Putnam and colleagues review adopt a process view and many of them track the emergence of tensions in phases of developing actions and interactions. The challenge of such a bottom-up view, though, is finding ways to alternate lenses that permit analysts to “zoom in and zoom out” from the routine micro-processes of organizing and the co-occurring large-scale events (Nicolini, 2009). Following Schad and colleagues, paradox involves *responding*; that is, actors move forward amid these contradictory and interrelated tensions and these responses contribute to the ongoing persistence of them. Future research needs to address such questions as how do individual approaches or relational dynamics reproduce in organizational systems and how do these systemic factors inform individual approaches or relational dynamics? How do power dynamics between alternative poles inform tensions, and how do these power dynamics shift over time? Such questions call for an increase in longitudinal studies as well as attention to contextual and situational factors.

Third, our papers call for a deeper understanding of emotion and its relation to irrationality in paradox studies. As both papers note, emotion has largely been ignored in much of the existing research, which biases the rational over the irrational. Putnam and colleagues argue that eliding emotions privileges rationality and relegates paradoxes to a very orderly process. Emotions, in turn, often interface with paradoxical experiences to signal disorder, disequilibrium, or unintended consequences (e.g., changes that reinforce the status quo). Schad and colleagues add to this list by noting how power acts like a lever on paradoxical tensions to trigger defensive emotions. Future research can offer an alternative to the instrumental/rational perspectives on paradox by privileging the role of emotions. It can further examine how the forces of power both reinforce and shift the rational dynamics of paradox to the irrational and back again. Finally, scholars have much to learn about the ways in which power and emotion may simultaneously trigger (dis)order and lead to (un)productive outcomes.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

If the rapid growth of paradox studies serves as an indication, theory and research in the organizational sciences has been moving toward a meta-perspective of paradox for some time. We do not see this trend declining any time soon and, if anything, likely increasing. As society grows more complex, paradox is and will continue to be a phenomenon that crosses all aspects of organizational life. There is much more exciting work to be done to harness its research potential and develop its implications for practice.

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